

The Ugly Israeli

Non-Jewish scholar Virginia Dominguez, who spent long periods of time in Israel in later years doing research, noted the traditional Jewish narcissism and interest in pedigrees of identity expressed by the Israelis she met: "'What do you mean you say you are not Jewish?' I was asked on several occasions. 'That you're not religious? That your mother wasn't Jewish? That 'we the Jews' wouldn't count you as a Jew because you had some Jewish ancestry but not the right ones, according to Halacha?' I was incredulous at first. I had no way then to anticipate this reaction. Everything else seemed to point to the importance of Jewishness, and to controlling both the content and limits of Jewishness."

[DOMINGUEZ, V., p. 179]

The omnipresent stresses of a predominantly military state, the emphatic "we versus them" paradigm of traditional Jewish identity, the glorification of power and aggression, millennia-old disdain for non-Jews, and the emotional powder keg of Holocaust death camps as a motivational tool has invariably led to the noxious Israeli persona that is so much remarked upon by non-Israelis (often even Israelis themselves) who spend much time in Israel. This "national character" is commonly cited for its arrogance, insolence (*chutzpah*), coldness, roughness, and rudeness, to begin a long list of unpleasant "uncivil" attributes. Many American Jews, in noting this Israeli character, tend to romanticize it. "There is a coldness," notes Jewish scholar Norman Cantor, "a mystery, a distance from humanity about [Israelis] that anyone from another country who lives and works in Israel for a half a year will be impressed by." [CANTOR, p. 417]

"Israelis have a reputation for bad manners," notes Jewish American immigrant to Israel Charles Liebman, "to the extent this reputation is deserved it stems from the sense of familiarity that Israelis feel towards one another." [LIEBMAN, p. 21] In noting their "curt nature," Adam Garfinkle adds that "Israelis are sometimes rude to an extent that it even bothers other Israelis. In 1995, Bezek, the communication company, instituted a program to get people to be more pleasant on the phone." [GARFINKLE, p. 113]

"The behavior of young Israelis," notes Israeli Jay Gonen, ".... is characterized by a high degree of *chutzpah* or gall; it is direct, blatant, unruly, clever, humorous, and indicates a certain lack of

sensitivity to social requirements ... [It has a] disregard for rules, regulations, social norms, and good manners." [GONEN, p. 111] Melford Spiro, in his study of the kibbutzim, discusses "insolence" as an "outstanding characteristic of the sabras" (native-born Israelis). [SPIRO, p. 427]

Herbert Russcol -- a Jewish American emigrant to Israel -- and his sabra wife Margarit Banai noted the Israeli national character this way: "'Horror stories' about the chutzpah -- of the sabra-men, women, and children alike -- are notorious. What appears to be (and often is) their cheek, their insolence, has shocked and enraged everyone who has met them. Sabras freely admit their chutzpah as a people, but are rarely aware of being chutzpadik themselves. They will tell you, 'Oh, we're terrible. It's a national vice. I am not so bad, but I have some very rude friends' ... Chutzpah is alarmingly close to chauvinism, and it must be admitted that the sabra is usually passionately chauvinistic in an era when no gospel has been more discredited in the West than blind, excessive patriotism ... Our young [in the West] wish to be as universal as blades of grass. But the young Israelis cannot afford this, and will tell you defensively, 'After all, you can't build a nation without nationalism.'" [RUSSCOL/BANAI, 1970, p. 170, 172]

"The deliberate and unadorned frankness [of Israelis]," notes Zionist historian Melvin Urofsky, "so highly prized by Israelis, scornful of Westernized and 'assimilated' manners, struck [Jewish] Americans [who sought to live in Israel], accustomed to some courtesies in life, as downright rude. (As late as 1965, a study of bureaucratic behavior in one large Israeli enterprise disclosed that 60 per cent of officials in contact with the public did not believe in greeting a visitor, nor would they reply to his greeting; an even higher percentage would not offer him a chair, simply letting him stand during the interview)." [UROFSKY, M., 1978, p. 274]

Such attributes, it may be recalled, are among those that Jews have been noted for across the centuries of their diaspora. Leon Poliakov rhetorically noted the inevitable echo here in the European Jewish past: "Are the Jews congenitally unsociable and rude, or are they this way as a result of having been segregated in ghettos? Such was the form of the question in which arguments raged [among non-Jewish intellectuals] in the 18th century on the eve of Emancipation." [CUDDIHY, Antisem, p. ix]

As Joyce Starr notes: "Among Americans who have had extensive dealings with Israelis, whether in government, business, or Jewish circles, the first adjectives that comes to their lips are arrogant,

willful, and sometimes infuriating." [STARR, J., 1990, p.. 31]

Ms. Starr, who is also Jewish, notes the interchange she had with a man called J.R., "a high-ranking Israeli intelligence officer": "'Most Americans I interviewed in the government sphere -- the State Department, Defense Department -- use certain words when they describe Israelis.' 'Arrogant,' J. R. replied. 'Yes, arrogant is a word that comes up frequently.' 'By the way, I think it's true. It applies to most Israelis. American fairness and Israeli fairness are different.' 'What is Israeli fairness.' 'Israeli fairness is 'You give me 75 percent and leave 25 percent.' 'Do they know they do it?' 'Most of them do not. I think most of them believe that by some divine decree, they deserve to get everything.' 'What is divine decree?' 'It comes from God.' He saw me laughing. 'It's not funny, Joyce." [STARR, J., 1990, p. 34]

"To the brief tourist," wrote Leonard Wolf, a Jewish resident of Israel in 1970, "[Israelis] are a rude, unsympathetic people, intent on themselves, irresponsible to nuances of feeling. Americans, who are instantly, if not profoundly, genial, are apt to find the slow pace of Israeli friendliness cold, comparing the Jewish hotelkeepers and tourist guides they meet unfavorably with the extraordinarily warm Arabs." [WOLF, L., 1970, p. 7]

In 2001, a Jewish ethnic newspaper, the Forward, noted that the national Israeli propensity to be cheats and hustlers (always evasive of the law) probably had roots in Jewish history in other lands: "[There is] universal awareness that something is definitely rotten in the state of Israel. This is, after all, a country in which bending the rules is said to be a national pasttime, cutting corners a way of life and cheating the authorities the proof of merit ... Sticklers for the law are ridiculed and abused, where anyone who works by the book is branded a sap, a 'freier,' the worst insult in modern Israeli lexicon ... Many people believe Israeli laxity, which borders on anarchy, is a national personality trait that cannot be eradicated by laws alone. Some trace the trait all the way back to the historical Jewish Diaspora, where Jews often found solace in bending the rules imposed by the often anti-Semitic authorities." [SHALEV, C., 6-1-01]

In 1986, B. Z. Sobel, an Israeli sociologist at the University of Haifa, discussed his research into reasons why so many Israelis emigrate from Israel to other lands. Among the motivations for leaving, he noted that "there is indeed an edginess [in Israeli society]; tempers flare, and verbal violence is rampant ... A large proportion of those [Israelis] interviewed for my study ... have been abroad [overseas] or were

born or raised abroad, and in almost all cases reference is made to the fact that 'people are nice in chutz la'aretz.' Strangers wish you a good day as they make change or pass you in the street, whereas at home [Israel] you can consider yourself fortunate to receive minimally civil treatment." [SOBEL, p. 153]

Among Sobel's interviews with fellow Jews in Israel was one with an immigrant who had resided there for twelve years. At some point in his interview with her, she "broke down and wept ... repeating over and over the word 'garbage': 'People here are garbage, garbage. They're hateful. I hate this place.'" [SOBEL, p. 153] Another interviewee, this one born Israeli, when asked by Sobel why she was emigrating to the United States, "laughed almost hysterically, and shouted, 'Why? Why? Because over there [in the United States] I am a child of God, a child of God. I am treated like a human being wherever I go. I am not shouted at or abused. Washer women in the supermarket don't command me to watch my step. Why?'" [SOBEL, p. 153]

"Americans are much more polite, I would say," remarked Israeli journalist Ze'ev Schiff, "while we are rude and have no patience ... You can see it when some of us are waiting in a queue in a bank or waiting for a bus ... This is the way we deal with each other, with the Egyptians, the Europeans, whoever." [STARR, J., 1990, p. 35] As Joyce Starr adds, "The tension [in Israel] spills out in sudden eruptions of rudeness. You can be standing in line in a gas station, and suddenly there will be an outbreak of shouts and terrible cursing for no apparent reason except that people explode in Israel." [STARR, J., 1990, p. 41]

Moshe Shokeid notes the comments of an Israeli identified as "Eli," and his perceptions of the Israelis he met in New York City: "When I looked at the crowd, I subconsciously saw myself in the mirror. When you see other Israelis screaming in Hebrew, you realize that you possibly look the same. Unfortunately, I rediscovered the ugly Israeli." [SHOKEID, 1998, p. 510]

In the 1980s, Virginia Dominguez, a non-Jewish American sociologist of Cuban heritage, fluent in Hebrew and a Fulbright scholar in Israel, worried that obnoxious Israeli behavior and Jewish self-obsession threatened to push her into the camp of the anti-Semites: "Has my obsessive, long-term encounter with Israeli society over the past six years turned me into the anti-Semite I never was? I find myself sharply intolerant of the noisy, brash behavior of most Israeli children. I coin terms of

description that are even explicitly judgmental. I get exasperated with the perennial references in the [Hebrew] media to the Jewishness of well-known public figures abroad." [DOMINGUEZ, p. 15]

Wendy Orange, a Jewish American, a new immigrant to Israel, noted with irritation the commentary of a group of Christian visitors she overheard in Jerusalem restaurant: "I overheard one Ghanaian woman say, 'Just ghastly, these people!' She's talking to a pregnant Irish woman, who responded wholeheartedly: 'I never imagined they'd be so crude ... so rude.' The Ghanaian, tall and dignified, her hair wrapped high in a colorful African sash, became more emphatic: 'No manners ... They drive like madmen.' She paused. 'They are far more barbarian than I was warned. And I was warned, my dear, many times.'" [ORANGE, W., 2000, p. 52]

An American Jewish scholar, Adam Garfinkle, noted his own child's experience in Israel's playgrounds: "One day I saw two boys square off in the playground, and one gave the other a good pop to the chin. The victim ran to the teacher and complained that Yossi had hit him. The teacher said, quite typically, "Well, go hit him back." By the time the child gets to first grade, he knows not to embarrass himself by going to the teacher for such matters. When [my son] Nate entered the first grade in the states the next year, we were not surprised to learn that he was 'a bit rough' with his friends." [GARFINKEL, p. 110]

In such an Israeli socialization of children, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, a professor in Israel, sees the classical Zionist dynamic: "A significant part of the Israeli self-image is an ideal of toughness, which is contrasted to the softness of Diaspora Jews. The creation of a separate new Israeli identity was accomplished by many expressions of contempt for any form of weakness or moral sensitivity." [BEIT-HALLAHMI, p. 238]

This harsh worldview, deeply aggrieved, shamed and angered by the Holocaust, and "centuries of persecution," celebrates ruthless pragmatism as its interrelational essence. Exploiting the Jewish suffering in the Holocaust as a moral shield from criticism, David Ben-Gurion once proclaimed, "It is not important what Gentiles say, what matters is what Jews do." [CHOMSKY, p. 236] Or as another Israeli prime minister (born in America), Golda Meir, put it: "The nations of Europe who did not help us during the Holocaust are not entitled to preach to us." [in RUBENSTEIN, A., p. 81]

In 1973, Georges Tamarin, an Israeli psychologist, was alarmed at what he called the Israeli "cult of

toughness," the "Israeli authoritarian personality," and its attendant "traits of ethnocentrism, glorification of strength and the prevailing admiration of the army." [TAMARIN p. 80] "Aggressiveness, loudness, ignorance of basic international expressions, and fascination with arms are held to be grounds for pride." [TAMARIN, p. 116] Tamarin saw in such national values an emphatic counter-construct and overcompensation against the embarrassing image of the physically weak European "ghetto Jew." He noted the "the constant preoccupation of Israeli youth with physical strength and courage and some caricaturist demonstrations of toughness and '(he) manhood (lack of inhibitions, loud speech, the ideal of the [military] parachutist, about whom all the women are 'crazy,' overemphasis on masculine symbols (in a style which is a curious mixture of Biblical and Hollywood-type narratives; see the 'Exodus') are dominant traits of the Israeli authoritarian personality." [TAMARIN, p. 87]

"Our negligence," complained Israeli Meron Benvenisti in 1989, "of ... values such as the brotherhood of man, social justice, and civil equality to all ha[s] led inexorably to chauvinism and xenophobia ... It is tempting to take the easy way out and dismiss the right-wing chauvinists and religious fundamentalists [in Israel] as an aberration, as marginal, half-crazed fanatics. Yet very influential sections of Israeli public opinion accept their philosophy, albeit considering them 'good boys who slipped'." [BENVENISTI, p. 45]

In 1989 an American-born Jew, Aaron Wolf, wrote a book about his experiences in the Israeli army. On one occasion after the killing of some Arab combatants, says the author, "I cornered Alon, the Chicagoan whose specialty is falling in love and who was one of the men on that patrol. 'Hey, Alon,' I said, 'Tell me something. You've been trained as a medic. You've had a three-month course learning how to save lives. How do you feel now that you've killed somebody?' 'How do I feel?' he said. 'I feel hungry.'" [WOLF, A., p. 171]

In 1989, Israeli commentators noted with concern a rash of brash "Russian Roulette"-styled behaviors in the country's youth. Groups of children were playing games of life and death daring with passing cars and trains, leaping out, or lying down, in front of them. Reuters called it a "deadly plague" happening to the Jewish state. "Adults gamble," a Jerusalem high school teacher told the wire service, "but the children have less money so they gamble with their lives. I believe Israeli behavior on the roads is macho, and I this is the way children without licenses behave in the streets." Reuters also

noted that "when Education Minister Yitzak Navon asked during a school visit why pupils played the deadly game, students replied: 'To show they're brave,' 'To tempt death,' and 'Just to show off.' [GOLLER]

Perhaps these children sought to emulate their parents; driving cars dangerously is an Israeli tradition. Too many people in Israel drive their automobiles like maniacs, daring death on the highways. "Twice as many Israelis," notes Lesley Hazeleton, "were killed on the roads during the Lebanon war as in the war itself. If a man was driving particularly recklessly, people would say that he'd just come back from reserve service in Lebanon. They were only half joking." [HAZELETON, L., 1987, p. 214]

From the founding of the Jewish state in 1948 to 1990, over 30,000 Israelis died in car accidents, more than twice the number of all the Jews killed in Israeli wars in the same period. In the years 1985 and 1986, a total of ten Israelis were killed by terrorists. Meanwhile, 893 people died in car crashes on Israeli highways. Although Israel is a country of only about six million people, between 1948 and 1990 nearly 630,000 people had been injured in car accidents. [STARR, J., 1990, p. 42]

As Joyce Starr noted in 1990, "If the present pace of accidents continues, two people in every Israeli family will be injured, and one person in every ten families will be killed. The number of children killed in auto accidents since 1967 is equivalent to almost a hundred grade school classes." [STARR, J., 1990, p. 42]

By 1999, the New York Times wire services noted the concern in Israel that its collective aggressive psyche was beginning to run amuck: "Israel has always had a rough edge, it has always been a society where aggression and rudeness was accepted as by-products of life under siege ... [But] after several exceptionally brutal crimes -- two men killed their wives and children and set their bodies on fire -- and new studies detailing the level of brutality in the schools, there has emerged an intense focus on violence among Israelis that has temporarily pushed aside the historic focus on conflict with the Arabs." "We have to deal with it exactly as we have with terrorism," said Ze'ev Friedman, "director of health, welfare, and social services for the city of Tel Aviv, "... because this is nothing less than an integral form of terrorism." [BRONNER, p. 6]

The same year a Tel Aviv Municipality study found that 12.5 percent of the homes in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa area (the largest population density in Israel) were tainted by domestic violence. [FISHBEIN, 12-22-99]

In 2000, Israel's National Council for the Welfare of the Child noted in its annual report the alarming rise in violence emanating from Israel's youth. "Complaints of violence by children in educational institutions" rose by 227% from 1995 to 1999. There were 29,000 criminal investigations of minors in 1999 alone. Also between 1994 and 1999, the number of children under 12 seeking help from call-in hotlines because of sexual abuse rose from 143 to 603. "I have no other words to describe it than to say our society is undergoing a process of bestialization," declared Dr. Asher Ben-Arye, the deputy-general of the National Council, and the editor of the disturbing report. By 2001, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported that "Israel, one of the world's smallest countries, ranks eighth in the world in youth violence." [HAARETZ, 4-18-01] That same year, Miss Israel, Ilanit Levy, wore a diamond-studded bullet-proof vest as a fashion statement at the Miss Universe competition. [WASHINGTON POST, 4-18-01]

In 2001, Great Britain's online Telegraph newspaper noted 'Israelis -- who take pride in being blunt and outspoken -- are to teach children good manners in an attempt to cut the nation's tendency towards violence. From the next school year, 12-year-olds will be taught how to behave politely, which knife and fork to use at table, and how to resolve arguments without shouting or coming to blows. Ronit Tirosh, director-general of the Education Ministry said: 'We are a brutal and impatient society, and the delicacy learned through these lessons may reduce our society's violent tendencies.' Israelis are proud not to say thank you and relish the informality of life ... Israeli life is a bruising contest of one-upmanship. The deepest fear is to be thought a 'sucker' who obeys the rules. Brusqueness has been cultivated by native-born Israelis as a reaction against the manners of Europe's Diaspora Jews, who were seen as cringing and subservient ... Educationalists have become worried about the level of playground violence.' [PHILIPS, A., 6-15-01]

In 1999 the mood in Israel was such that an Israeli court was expected to give a convicted Israeli murderer of a British tourist a reduced sentence because of flashbacks he had of his military work executing Arabs. Major Daniel Okev claimed he murdered Gentile hitch-hiker Max Hunter and wounded his girlfriend "during a flashback to his days in a secret Israeli hit squad which targeted

suspected Palestinian terrorists for summary execution ... When he found himself at night in his car with two strangers, Okev said he believed he had a flashback to similar occasions on operations in Gaza. He looked down and saw his gun, sparking the murder." [REES, M., p. 12]

Traditional Jewish "chutzpah" is of course an integral part of the Israeli identity. "To a large degree," says Israeli professor Jay Gonen, "... Herzl's impact [on Jewish nationalism] was due to a quality of chutzpah, or unmitigated gall, which became an integral part of Zionism and was subsequently elevated almost to an art form by native-born Israelis, or sabras." [GONEN, p. 47]

An example of how far this chutzpah can go was evidenced in an incident during the Palestinian uprising -- known as the Intifada -- that began in 1987 against Israeli occupation in Gaza and the West Bank. Of the hundreds of Palestinians shot and killed or wounded by Israeli troops in the Intifada's first year, one young Arab teenager, Nasir Hawwash, was shot in the head and lay in a hospital, irrecoverably brain dead. One day Nasir's brother received a telephone call from a Jewish Israeli citizen, an emissary for the family of a fellow middle-aged Israeli in the hospital with a serious heart condition. The stranger on the phone asked that the Hawwash family donate Nasir's heart to save the Jewish man in the hospital who needed it. "Nasir's older brother," notes Glenn Frankel, "was appalled that an Israeli would ask such a thing. She told him, 'This is how we'll make peace between Arabs and Jews.' He was not buying it. 'How can you make peace when you shoot someone and then you take the heart to give life to another Israeli?' he told her." As the story for the heart request made the Israeli news, one Palestinian "radical" noted that "If we give the Israelis this heart, soon they'll be shooting us for our organs." [FRANKEL, p. 110-111]

The Arab boy's father was eventually offered "more money than [his] family would have seen in a lifetime" for his son's heart, but he told the Israeli pleaders no. "What did they want from me?" he asked. "This was my son. They took him away, then they wanted his body. This I could not give." [FRANKEL, p. 111]

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